

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE GOD-WARD ASPECT

“Be thou for the people God-ward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God” (Exodus 18:19).

WHEN the Israelite host had left Rephidim, they began to climb up from the coast of the Red Sea into the heart of the mountain range of Sinai. Their route has been compared to a stair of rock. Before them, through the pure air, floated the majestic cloud, leading them they knew not whither. They only knew that they had no option but to follow, since their supply of manna and water depended on absolute obedience to its movement.

On either side rose the cliffs of red sandstone, like the walls of some mighty temple, to the Holy of Holies of which they were ever approaching. It was apparently on the route that the incident reported in this chapter took place, for the words, **“at the mount of God,”** probably refer to the entire region.

Tidings in the desert fly fast; and the aged priest, in the fastnesses of Midian, had been kept fully informed of the wonderful series of events of which his relative had been the center.

When, therefore, tidings came of the arrival of the vast host in the vicinity of Sinai, he took Zipporah, Moses' wife, and her two sons, who had been entrusted to his care, and brought them unto Moses. After the customary profuse Oriental salutations, they spoke long and admiringly of the way in which the Lord had led his people. And the day closed with a solemn feast and sacrifice.

The morrow seems to have been a rest day. The cloud did not move forward, but remained stationary; as if moored by an invisible cable, and spreading itself out as a refreshing canopy from the burning heat of the sun. And on that day an incident took place which was destined to have important issues on the history of the great leader as well as of the people whom he led. **“It came to pass on the morrow that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening”** (ver. 13).

Moses' Habitual Practice.

We get a sudden glimpse here into the kind of life which Moses at this time was leading.

When the host encamped, and there was a day at liberty from the weariness of the march, he seems to have sat on a judgment-seat, to which all the people came who had any disputes, or grievances, or matters about which they desired to obtain advice and Divine counsel.

Despite all their murmurings they looked upon him as the organ for the voice of God, and sought from his lips an authoritative declaration of the Divine will. To use his own words, when the people had a matter, they came unto him to inquire of God; and he made them know the statutes of God and his laws.

It was a Divine work, sufficient to engross his noblest powers, and to tax resources which had been stored up within him through long years of waiting; for what is higher in all this world than to serve as the interpreter of whom Job speaks, “**One among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness**” (Job 33:23).

- To hear the difficulties, perplexities, and hard questions of the anxious and troubled;
- To inquire for them to God;
- To bring their causes to his bar for judgment, and to his mercy-seat for help;
- To come back to them to teach them, to show them the way in which they should walk, and the work they should do.

This is employment which was worthy of the delicacy and strength of an angel’s love, and most nearly approaches the ministry of the Redeemer. This blessed work of mediatorship was not borne by Moses as a Priest, for as yet the Priesthood was not constituted; but as a large-hearted, nobleman, who was at leisure from himself, and had the ear of God. He was “**for the people to God-ward.**”

And it opens up a very interesting vista of service for us all, especially for those who are intimate with the King, and habituated to the royal Court.

Why should we not enter more largely into participation with Moses in this delightful service, which is open to those who are slow of speech equally as to those who are golden-mouthed; and affords opportunities for the very powers which most shrink from the glare of publicity and the gaze of men?

We can imagine him going to God each day with long lists of questions for one and another of the mighty host. This and the other cause he laid before Him for counsel, quoting names and circumstances, arguments and reasons on either side, and waiting for the message which he was to carry back. What variety! What directness! What reality must have pervaded his prayers!

How vividly must he have realized that he was, indeed, in partnership with the Most High, a fellow-worker and yoke-fellow; and that they had a common interest in the people whom they loved!

Why should not we also begin to live such a life? The voice that spake to him speaks to us, “**Be thou for the people to God-ward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God**” (ver. 19). And the gates through which he passed and repassed stand open day and night.

We often wonder at Luther, who spent three hours each day in prayer and meditation; at Bishop Andrewes, spending the greater part of five hours every day in fellowship with God; at John Welsh, who thought that day ill spent which did not witness eight or ten hours of closet communion. It seems to us as if such prolonged praying must involve an endless monotony of vain repetitions. We forget that when men are sent to market with a host of commissions from their neighbours and friends, they must needs tarry longer than when they go only for themselves. It would be a very wholesome thing if the causes of others were to detain us more constantly before the Lord.

This “**being for the people to God-ward**” became more and more characteristic of the life of Moses. Whenever the people cried unto him, he prayed unto the Lord. When the spirit of revolt spread through the camp, he fell upon his face. When it seemed likely that the whole nation must perish for their sin, he stood in the breach, and besought the Lord, and turned away the destruction that hung over them like a lurid cloud. Twice for forty days their interests detained him in the holy mount. And in long after years he is classed with Samuel as one who had stood before God for his people.

What a striking type is this of our Lord Jesus, though at the best there is a marvellous gulf between the two. For Moses was faithful over God’s household as a servant; but Christ as a Son, whose house are we. All that Moses did He will do, and more. When we have a matter, let us go to Him. He is for us to God-ward, and will bring our causes to God. Through Him we may inquire of God; and he will make us know (for the responsibility of making us know is on Him, and if one way will not suffice we may trust Him to adopt another) the statutes of God and his laws; and will show us the way in which we should walk, and the work that we must do.

The Tax on Moses’ Strength.

Work like this cannot be done without severe expenditure of all that is most vital to man. It drains the sympathies, taxes the brain, wearies the heart charged with the anxieties and sorrows, the burdens and needs of a throng of perplexed and troubled souls. You cannot save others and save yourself as well. Virtue cannot go forth to heal without your becoming conscious of the drain. You can only comfort others when you understand them; and you cannot understand them till you have given yourself away to them. But the effort to do this costs you all that you are worth to some other soul. And it therefore became apparent to the keen eye of Jethro’s loving solicitude that both Moses and the people were being worn away in his attempt to meet all their demands.

In after years Moses himself seems to have broken down under the burden.

“And Moses said unto the Lord, Wherefore hast Thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that Thou layest the burden of all this people upon me? Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them, that Thou shouldst say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which Thou swarest unto their fathers?” (Numbers 11:11, 12).

Moses did not feel that strain now when Jethro spoke, for it was as yet fresh on him: but it was, nevertheless, sapping his strength, and Jethro remarked it.

We do not always see the cost at which we are doing our work. We are sustained by the excitement and interest of it, The stir, the rush, the cry of the combatants, the chances and opportunities of the battle, the alluring form of victory, to be won at the price of just one more effort - all these things conceal from us the expenditure of our reserves, which is patent enough to others.

Some men get weary of forbearing; they cannot live slowly; they must expend themselves, pouring their lives out as a libation from a bowl. And it is an act of benevolence when some Jethro is prompted to interpose and suggest a mitigation of the fever, a slackening of the eager rush. The Jethros seldom prevail with us. They get scant thanks for their pains. We have to learn by some terrible collapse. But they have, at least, deserved well by us.

From man, breaking down under the weight of human care imposed on his heart by his fellows, let us turn to the true Priest and Brother of Man; into whose ear is being poured one incessant stream of complaint and sorrow, of care and need, and sin. It is as if all the letters, deposited in all the receiving boxes of England year by year, were directed to one man, who must open and answer them all himself. But even that illustration gives an utterly inadequate idea of all that devolves on our dear Master, Christ, whose heart is the receptacle of all the anguish, sorrow, and soul-travail of mankind.

Moses' patience lasted for a few months only; but His till the work is done (Deuteronomy 1:31; Isaiah 63:9; Acts 13:18). He faints not, neither is weary; because He combines with a woman's sympathy and delicacy of touch and insight, all the patience and strength of the Divine. But do we sufficiently realize the cost at which, through the ages, He is exercising his ministry on our behalf? Think ye not that the festal processions of the glorified often halt upon their way, like that which stayed on the shoulder of Olivet, because the king is in tears! He is "**touched with the feeling of our infirmities.**"

Moses' Assent to Jethros Proposal.

It cannot be God's will that any of his servants should wear away. He knows our frame too well to overtax its frail machinery. No hard taskmaster is He, driving his slaves beyond the limit of human endurance. The burden of responsibility which He lays upon their shoulders may be heavy; but it is not too heavy. The engagements which He assigns for each day may be many; but not too many for its working hours. The souls committed to their charge may be numbered by thousands; but they are not more than can be overlooked and shepherded. The bell never summons a servant to a duty concerning which God does not say to him, My grace is sufficient for thee; as thy day so shall thy strength be.

Sometimes God's workers make the mistake of burdening themselves with work which others could do as well as themselves, and, indeed, would be the better for doing.

This seems to have been the case with Moses.

He appeared to think that he alone could judge, manage, and administer the affairs of Israel. And this monopoly of the administration was working adversely. It was overtaxing himself; it was wearing out the people; it was delaying the course of justice; and it was allowing a large amount of talent to lie unused. Jethro's advice was therefore most timely, that he should provide out of all the people able men, with the three important qualifications, that they should fear God, love truth, and hate unjust gain. These were to deal with the small matters, whilst the greater ones were still brought to himself.

Moses has been blamed for doing this. It has been said that if he had trusted God, the power which was now to be divided among many might have been concentrated on himself; so that he might have continued to bear the responsibility and honour of judgment alone. God could have enabled him to do all the work which these others were now to divide with him.

But, surely, even if that had been the case and we would not for a moment dispute that it could have been so yet, it would not have been so well as the division of interest and labour which now took place.

It was much better to set all these men to work than to do all their work.

- It evoked talent;
- It ennobled them by placing them in positions of responsibility before their fellows;
- It drove them to personal dealings with God;
- It inspired them with a fellow-feeling with Moses;
- It turned critics into sympathizers and companions;
- It educated them for positions for which they might be required in the emergencies of the future.

It is a great matter to be a good workman, one not needing to be ashamed; but it is a greater to be able to call out other workmen, and to set them at work.

This policy was that which the apostles adopted when the business of the Church had so grown upon their hands as to engross too much of their time and energy. They could no longer combine the serving of tables with the ministry of the Word; and as they could not hesitate which side of their double office to abandon, they called in the help of Stephen and his colleagues "**to serve tables,**" whilst they gave themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

Is there not a thought here for many of the Lord's workers who may read these words?

- Are we not dissipating our energies over too wide an area?
- Do we not attempt to embrace in our life many things which others could do as well as ourselves?
- Ought not those specially, who are gifted with the power of prayer and spiritual insight, to cultivate those special sides of their nature, leaving details of management and direction of finance to others?

We should live on the greatest side of our nature; reserving ourselves for that; not careless of minor details, if there is no one else to manage them; but prepared to hand them over to “**able men**,” even though they may have to learn their duties at a cost, in the beginning, of some mistakes and failures.

The mountain brow, with its fellowship, affords a leverage from which we may best move earth. We touch men most when we most touch God. The prophet and priest, the man of God, the teacher, these are among the choicest gifts of God to men. And if you are gifted specially in these directions, cultivate such endowments to the uttermost they are rare enough leaving other details to be cared for by others who may be cast in a more practical mold.

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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